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A Polyglot Parrot in Baroque Rome

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If you were walking through the center of Rome in the 1620s, you would have heard many different languages. These languages were spoken by pilgrims, cardinals and their entourage, merchants, and diplomats, and occasionally also by parrots. One such animal with exceptional linguistic skills was owned by Balduin Breyll (n.d.), a Flemish merchant living in Rome. This parrot could hold whole conversations in Flemish with members of Breyll's household and family. He had also taught himself some Italian words by repeating after street sellers who passed his window. And he sang songs in Flemish about love and in French about wine.

We know about this polyglot parrot from the German physician Johannes Faber's (1574-1629) entry on a Mexican parrot in the *Tesoro messicano* ("Mexican Treasury"), an encyclopedia about the natural history of Mexico, published in 1651 by the Roman Accademia dei Lincei. In this talk, I focus on Faber's discussion of Breyll's parrot and relate it to early modern interpretations of the boundaries between human and non-human animals. Breyll's parrot provides an interesting case study of the complexities of animal speech, and of studying exotic animals in the early modern period, between autoptic observations and interpreting ancient and modern sources.

Keywords

Exotic zoology, animal speech, human-animal bounda

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Short Biography

Matthijs Jonker is Assistant Professor Early Modern Art History at Utrecht University. He studies the transcultural and trans-Atlantic production and circulation of knowledge in the early modern period, with a specific focus on the functions of images and illustrations in (present-day) Mexico, Italy and Spain. Between 2020-2023, he was Director of Studies in Art History and Cultural Sciences at the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome. Earlier, he was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Bibliotheca Hertziana –Max-Planck-Institut für Kunstgeschichte in Rome, where he started his current research project. Matthijs' first book, *The Academization of Art: The Early Histories of the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca*, was published in 2022 with

Quasar in Rome. Together with dr. Katherine Reinhart he is completing an edited volume on the visual culture of scientific societies in the early modern period, which is scheduled to appear next spring with Brepols.

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